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U. S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Wednesday, December 27, 1933.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "Seasoning for Variety." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics,
U.S.D.A.

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In spite of all our talk about the advantages of up-to-date housekeeping and modern methods and so on, our grandmothers knew many bits of housekeeping wisdom that would be very useful to any of us today. Early American housewives were artists at the job of economizing. They prided themselves on their thrift, especially in the kitchen, and many of them could have taught us moderns a thing or two about stretching household pennies.

For example, they could have given us some pointers on using garden herbs and spices to add variety to food. Those earlier housekeepers in this country had a real problem in preventing monotony and adding interest to winter meals when their food selection was so limited. It had to be small, for modern methods of food preservation and refrigeration and rapid transportation hadn't yet come in. People had to depend on dried foods or those that would store easily during the winter. That ruled out fresh products like green vegetables and fresh fruits and other foods which we lucky mortals now can buy in the markets at any season. Our grandmothers had to use this small group of foods over and over. But they met the problem of monotony by clever seasoning.

Those of us who have to manage on a low-cost diet may well take a tip from these old-timers. Those of us who use the inexpensive foods day after day can give these old stand-bys new interest by the way we flavor and season them.

And speaking of our grandmothers and their seasonings reminds me of an old Colonial house I visited not long ago. The guide who showed me the place pointed out a little garden spot at the rear of the house which he called "the housewife's spice-and-herb patch." A small building nearby he spoke of as "her drying house." You see, my lady grew her own seasonings in her own little garden and when their flavor was at its height, she gathered the fragrant sprays or the roots and hung them to dry. Later she stored them in tight containers ready for use in seasoning the winter dishes. Her seasonings came from different parts of the plants. Sometimes she dried the leaves or stalks, sometimes she dried the flower buds, sometimes the seeds and sometimes the roots -- whichever part would give the best flavor. Well, today we can still have an herb patch and grow our own seasonings if we want to. Or we can buy these same seasonings all prepared from the grocer's shelf. In either case, if we use them skillfully we can liven up many a dull dish so that the family will come back for second helpings.

Let's look at some of the herbs that might add flavor to our winter food. First, some useful seasoning leaves. Sage comes to mind first. I guess it must be the holiday season and the thought of roast fowl that reminds me of sage. Well, dried and powdered sage leaves are often excellent in meat sauces and stuffings. In using sage, the chief point to remember is that this is a strong herb. A very little of it goes a long way. So it makes a good flavor for meats of pronounced flavor -- for the stuffing of game; or duck and goose; or ham or pork. But sage is often too strong for the delicately flavored meats. They can't hold their own against it. By the way, some people like a tiny bit of sage with their boiled cabbage and their string beans or greens.

For the delicately flavored meats, two other seasonings, milder than sage, are suitable. These are thyme and marjoram. You can use the two together very successfully in meat sauces and stuffings. They are good with turkey, squab, chicken and fish. These same mild seasonings are also good with green beans cooked with bacon and salt pork and with lima beans.

The next old-time garden seasoning on my list is bay leaf. That's another fragrant dried leaf that needs sparing use. Bay leaf is the favorite herb for soups. You can use it in meat, fish or vegetable soup. A half a leaf will usually flavor enough soup for four people. You can also use a leaf of bay in the cooking water when you are cooking fish, ham, game or veal. Use just part of a leaf for seasoning brown sauce or tomato sauce. And remove the leaf before serving, of course. Dried celery tops are cheap and useful seasonings for soups, stuffings, stews and sauces. Save all your celery leaves and hang them up in a paper sack to dry. Then store them in a tight container. By the way, celery seeds are particularly good with potato salad and cold slaw.

Sometimes you can get the best effect by using a combination of herbs for seasoning. Many old-fashioned recipes call for a "bouquet of herbs." The nearest we come to this today are the little bundles of soup greens that you sometimes see for sale in the market. To duplicate the flavor of the old-fashioned bouquet, use one-fourth teaspoon each of dried sage, thyme, marjoram and fresh chopped parsley with half a bay leaf and a sprig of dried celery leaf. Tie all these together loosely in a little cheesecloth bag. Put this bagful in the soup while it's cooking, or in with the meat or fish. Remove the bag before serving.

Among the well-known seasonings that are actually dried flowers, there's dill and cloves. You will find dill useful not only in pickles but also in seasoning cream soups and fish. As for cloves, the other dried flower so popular for spicing food, you can buy these either whole or powdered. Use whole cloves whenever you want to avoid a dark powdery residue in the food. The flavor of cloves is good with smoked ham and all smoked meat. A suggestion of clove picks up tomato or other vegetable soups and enlivens all pickled fruits that you serve with meat. A faint flavor of clove is excellent in tomato sauce.

Well, time's almost up. And that's only a start on this matter of seasoning in different ways. But here are the chief points to remember. Never over do your seasonings. A faint illusive flavor is much more appetizing than a strong flavor. Experiment with your seasonings. Try this and that, always in very small amounts. And try combinations of herbs. They often give a better taste than one flavor used alone.

Tomorrow: "Care of Velvet."

